

gation of the Holy Office, the following *dubium* was propounded:

*Question.* "Is it lawful by means of a medium, or without a medium, whether hypnotism be employed or not, to take part in any sort of spiritistic communications or manifestations, even such as present an appearance of sincerity and piety, either by questioning the souls or spirits, or by listening to the answers received, or merely by looking on, even with a silent or explicit protest that one has no wish to have anything to do with evil spirits.

"The most Eminent and Reverend Fathers decided that in every one of these suppositions the answer must be in the negative."

This decree was ratified on April 26, 1917, by His Holiness Pope Benedict XV.<sup>18</sup>

It is not very likely that the members of the Congregation of the Holy Office had made any profound researches into the history of Spiritualism. They probably based their decision upon theological considerations alone. But if they had troubled themselves to investigate the origins and early developments of the movement, they would have found much to confirm their attitude of distrust. As a source of guidance the first communicating spirits had brought no blessing upon their votaries but only dire calamity. Let us turn, therefore, to this strangely sinister portent of so much that was to follow. This is an aspect of the case which must not be left out of account in any statement of the Catholic position.

<sup>18</sup> *Acta Apostolicæ Sedis*, Vol. IX, p. 268.

## CHAPTER II

### THE FOUNDERS OF MODERN SPIRITUALISM<sup>1</sup>

THERE can be no doubt that, like other newfangled creeds which have survived for half a century or more and have attracted a considerable following, Spiritualism counts among its associates many well-meaning people whose lives are free from reproach. I have personally come into contact with many such, just as I have known some estimable Christian Scientists and perfectly sincere Theosophists. Ever since a large part of the world drifted from its religious moorings under stress of the Reformation, an ever-increasing number of earnest men and women, striving to find an anchorage for their aspirations after God and a future life, have attached themselves to almost any system which offered some half truth lending itself readily to experimental trial. Christian Science makes its main appeal to the healing of disease; Theosophy to the doctrine of Karma which professes to explain the mystery of human suffering; Spiritualism bases its claim upon certain psychic phenomena which, as I venture to hold, are real in some cases, though often fraudulent, and which down to our own times have never been adequately investigated. People who are groping for any religious holdfast take no interest, as a rule, in the past history of these movements. They only want a prescription which will assuage some sort of dull ache in their souls; while often enough in the mere effort to comply with certain outward observances or to imbibe a teaching which is rather beyond their

<sup>1</sup> Lest I should seem to have borrowed other people's materials without acknowledgment, it may be noted that the substance of this chapter was printed in *The Month* for February, 1920.



powers of apprehension they find a measure of relief which contents them. There are very few Christian Scientists who are acquainted with the real facts of the life of Mrs. Eddy as they are set out irrefutably in the biographies by Georgine Milmine or E. F. Dakin. There are hardly any Theosophists who can be persuaded to look into the history of the Theosophical Society, an organization built up by Madame Blavatsky out of the debris of her own career as a spiritualist and out of Col. Olcott's abortive "Miracle Club." In like manner, most of the adherents of the movement with which we are here concerned find a sufficient guarantee of respectability in the support of such representatives as Sir Oliver Lodge and the late Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, and do not care to trouble themselves about its origin. These two protagonists may be men of the highest repute — just as were Judge Edmonds, Professor R. Hare, and Mr. Robert Dale Owen in the middle of the nineteenth century — but the advent of the "New Revelation" cannot be dated from the afternoon in September, 1915, when Lady Lodge went to see Mrs. Osborne Leonard in the hopes of getting into touch with her dead son Raymond. Spiritualism already had a long and rather grim history behind it. Mrs. Leonard is, no doubt, a medium whose honesty is above suspicion,<sup>2</sup> but there have been hundreds of practitioners before her, from Margarett and Katie Fox down to Eusapia Palladino, whose records are by no means so satisfactory. We cannot pass judgment upon the system merely from the communications alleged to have been made through approved mediums during the past twenty years. It is to the tendency of the cult as a whole that

<sup>2</sup>See the very interesting paper by Miss Radclyffe-Hall and Lady Troubridge in Part 78, of the *Proceedings of the Society for Psychical Research*, p. 343. The detective agency used found nothing suggestive of trickery on the part of Mrs. Leonard.

appeal must primarily be made, and least of all can we afford to neglect the sad lesson taught by the career of its actual founders. For this reason I propose, in the present chapter, to give an account of some features in their history — a history which has attracted too little attention. Those enthusiasts who see something providential and divine in the movement, may surely be called upon to offer an explanation of the fact that the powers which guided it were so singularly unfortunate in their selection of the instruments through which this heavenly message was first made known to the world.

On March 31, 1920, a widely advertised meeting was held in the Queen's Hall, London, to commemorate the anniversary of the birth of Modern Spiritualism. Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, an old schoolfellow of mine, as a sequel to a short controversial correspondence I had had with him just then, was kind enough to send me a ticket. He was himself the principal speaker, and I heard him tell a crowded audience that they were there that evening "to celebrate the seventy-second anniversary of what spiritualists considered to be the greatest event which had occurred in the world for two thousand years." He did not hesitate to proclaim that the movement began with the manifestations at Hydesville in Wayne County, New York, in which the two Fox sisters played a principal part. Margarett Fox was then (March, 1848) 14 or 15 years old, and her sister Katie 12.<sup>3</sup> Inexplicable noises and rappings, it is said, had been heard for some time in the farmhouse occupied by the family, and one night Margarett Fox, snapping her fingers a certain number of times, challenged the powers which produced these sounds to reply by

<sup>3</sup>There is some discrepancy in different books regarding the ages of the children. I follow the statement of their mother, Mrs. Fox, as cited by H. Spicer, *Sights and Sounds* (London: 1853), pp. 57-58. With this, Mr. Podmore's account agrees, and also that of Sir A. C. Doyle.



making the same number of raps. This was done. Then their mother, Mrs. Fox, who was present, asked the spirit to give by raps, first of all the number of her children (only the two youngest girls were actually living in the house), and afterwards their respective ages. To all these questions correct answers were returned. After some further experiments of the same sort on different occasions in which the neighbours participated, it occurred to someone to try to ascertain the name of the rapping spirit; this he did by calling out the letters of the alphabet in turn and requesting that a rap should be given at the proper letter. In this way the name "Charles B. Rosna" was spelled out and a basis for further communications was established.\* It is quite unnecessary to describe in detail the developments of this new system of spiritual telegraphy. Great excitement was caused in the neighbourhood, and when the family a few months later moved to Rochester, the rappings followed them there. Gossip and the newspapers spread the report of these occurrences far and wide. Other curious persons soon began to try to put themselves in communication with the spirits, notably Leah, a much older sister of the Fox children, who was married to a man named Fish. It was she, we are told, who first discovered that there was money in the business, but though numbers of people strove to develop mediumistic powers, the two younger Fox sisters remained for a long time by far

\*The spirit who communicated and was responsible for the knockings purported to be that of a peddler who had been murdered by some previous occupant of the house and had been buried in the cellar. See Sir A. C. Doyle's article in *Psychic Science*, Vol. I (1922), pp. 212-237, entitled "The Mystery of the Three Fox Sisters." I confess that I am not satisfied with the evidence for the discovery of the remains of the murdered man. Some traces were said to have been found at the time in 1848, and an almost complete skeleton in 1904. The point is irrelevant to the present discussion. What is certain is that when the Fox children, almost immediately afterwards, removed to Rochester, their repose continued to be disturbed by manifestations of a most alarming and turbulent character. See the long account given in their elder sister's book, *The Missing Link*.

the most successful of the practitioners in this line, and very soon all sorts of other phenomena manifested themselves in their presence in addition to the rappings. Writing in 1854, by which time Spiritualism as a cult had become familiar in every part of the United States, and was rapidly spreading over Europe, Mr. Capron remarks:

"During the six years that have elapsed since the commencement of the manifestations at Hydesville, there have been few more singular, and no more convincing proofs of the agency of spirits than were given to the family of Mr. Fox. Almost every variety of the phenomena that have startled the world since that time was known to them long before the public were made aware of the existence of such strange occurrences. They have had all the variety of sounds, speaking in an audible voice, moving of furniture, touching and writing by the spirits. Blocks of wood were thrown into the windows when they were open, with important directions written upon them. Information was given to the family which was of essential benefit, by writing on the floor of a room where it was known that no living visible person had been."<sup>5</sup>

The rapidity with which the craze spread almost passes belief. Judge Edmonds, a man of unimpeachable integrity, who had occupied the highest judicial position in the United States, became an early convert. He himself had spiritual visions, in which he saw spirit forms as clearly as the objects he beheld with his bodily eyes; endless communications were made to him in automatic script which purported to emanate from Francis Bacon, Swedenborg, Benjamin Franklin, and other celebrities of the past; his daughter developed mediumistic powers, and in her trances is said to have spoken in half a dozen different languages which she had never learned. Now, Judge Edmonds, after travelling in every part of the States to lecture to his fellow spiritualists, seriously computed that already in 1854 the followers of the move-

<sup>5</sup>Capron, *Modern Spiritualism, Its Facts and Fanaticisms* (1855), p. 55.



ment in America numbered as many as 3,000,000. Two years earlier, Mr. H. Spicer, an Englishman, after a visit to the States, had brought back word that there were 30,000 mediums there, asserting in particular that there were 300 "magnetic circles," i.e., reunions of spiritualists, in the one city of Philadelphia. While we cannot fail to regard these estimates as greatly exaggerated,<sup>6</sup> they bear witness beyond doubt to a development which was felt to be quite phenomenal. So far as I have been able to discover, the fact that this prodigious excitement was subsequent to, and set in motion by, the experiences of the Fox sisters at Hydesville, is questioned by no one, though they themselves were gravely suspected of fraud by the more sceptical.

Upon the findings of the committee of doctors in Buffalo, who inquired into the rapping phenomena of the Fox family as early as February, 1851, I do not propose to dwell. They came to the very definite conclusion that the girls produced the noises themselves by cracking their knee joints, but they did not exclude the possibility of other articulations, for example, those of the toes or the ankles, being used in the same way. The report may be read in Podmore,<sup>7</sup> and as a carefully reasoned argument it is certainly damaging to the credit of the parties suspected. A few weeks later a certain Mrs. Culver, a connection of the Fox family, volunteered a statement, published in the *New York Herald*, in which she declared that Katie Fox had accepted her proffered assistance and shown her how to produce the raps by cracking her toes. Mrs. Culver averred that she had acquired some

<sup>6</sup>These figures were challenged by other spiritualists but Judge Edmonds defended them warmly. In 1866 he held that there were 5,000,000 believers in the United States, i.e., one sixth of the total population. See *The Spiritual Magazine*, 1867, p. 328 and cf., p. 159.

<sup>7</sup>*Modern Spiritualism*, I, p. 184. See also Mrs. Henry Sidgwick in the *Proceedings of the S.P.R.*, Vol. IV, p. 47.

dexterity in the business, but was too old to rival the performances of those who had learned it in early youth. A considerable discussion followed in the newspapers, the spiritualists replying with vigour, but it is at any rate clear that an attitude of credulity was by no means universally prevalent. More than a year before the investigation of the Buffalo doctors (i.e., in February, 1850), an English traveller who visited the Fox girls at Rochester, wrote to Mr. Epes Sargent:

"My opinion of the rappings is that they are human, very human, sinfully human, made to get money by. If really there is a ghost in the matter, then quite certainly he is very fickle, something of a liar, very clumsy, very trifling, and altogether wanting in good taste. It would indeed be very painful to me, exceedingly, if I thought that any man on this earth, on dying, had ever turned into such a paltry, contemptible ghost. . . . My experience will be useful to me in regard to superstition as a disease of the human mind. I have learned something from the errand I have been on. But to me the knockings themselves are not nearly so wonderful as the echoes they make in the city of New York."<sup>8</sup>

The curious thing is that the writer of this letter (a Mr. W. M., only initials are given), became at a later date a convinced believer in Spiritualism. Be this as it may, it is certain that the movement was not decisively checked or retarded by the criticism of which the Fox sisters were the object. Though, as we shall see later, Margaretta (afterwards Mrs. Kane), gave no séances from about 1856 to 1867, her sister Katie (Mrs. Jencken) was always engrossed in her mediumship, and it may be said roughly that for thirty years or more the two were looked upon as among the most highly gifted of the mediumistic fraternity. But in October, 1888, when the sisters were already something more than middle-aged, an astounding event happened. For several

<sup>8</sup>Epes Sargent, *Planchette, or the Despair of Science* (Boston: 1869), p. 34.



weeks rumours had been rife that an exposure of the frauds of Spiritualism was imminent. Mrs. Margaretta Fox Kane, arriving in New York from Europe, manifested to an interviewer her intention of showing up the whole business. She had had, it would seem, a bitter quarrel with her elder sister, Mrs. Leah Underhill (formerly Fish), who not very long before had published a book, *The Missing Link in Modern Spiritualism* (New York, 1885). This purported to tell the history of those early manifestations at Hydesville and Rochester in which the three sisters had been concerned, but I do not know whether this was the cause of the quarrel. In any case, the interview with Mrs. Kane, reported in the *New York Herald* for September 24, 1888, included the following details:

"Since you now despise Spiritualism, how was it you were engaged in it so long?" I asked.

"Another sister of mine," and she coupled the name with an injurious adjective, "made me take up with it. She's my damnable enemy.<sup>9</sup> I hate her. My God! I'd poison her! No I wouldn't, but I'll lash her with my tongue. She was 23 years old the day I was born. I was an aunt seven years before I was born. Ha! Ha!"

As the language itself shows, Mrs. Kane was in a very excited state, and declared tragically that she would have thrown herself overboard on the journey, if she had not been prevented by the captain and the doctor. Then she resumed:

"Yes, I am going to expose Spiritualism from its very foundations. I have had the idea in my head for many a year, but I have never come to a determination before. . . . I loath the thing I have been. As I used to say to those who wanted me to give a séance: 'You are driving me to hell.' Then the next day I would drown my remorse

<sup>9</sup>It is only fair to note that Mrs. Emma Hardinge Britten in *The Unseen Universe* (September, 1892, p. 302), while writing sympathetically about the sisters Margaretta and Katie, describes Mrs. Leah Underhill as "one of the most generous and noble of women." Mrs. Britten had known them all intimately.

in wine. I was too honest to remain a medium. That's why I gave up my exhibitions.

"When Spiritualism first began, Kate and I were little children, and this old woman, my other sister, made us her tools. Mother was a silly woman. She was a fanatic. I call her that because she was honest. She believed in these things. Spiritualism started from just nothing. . . . Our sister used us in her exhibitions and we made money for her.

"Dr. Kane found me when I was leading this life." The woman's voice trembled just here and she nearly broke down. "I was only 13 when he took me out of it and placed me at school. I was educated in Philadelphia. When I was 16 years old, he returned from the Arctic and we were married."

The interview ended by a demonstration of how the rappings could be produced — so at least the reporter believed — by cracking the toes. On October 9, the youngest sister, Katie (Mrs. Jencken), also a widow, arrived from Europe. She likewise accorded an interview to the representative of the *New York Herald* and expressed her intention of taking part in the exposure projected by Mrs. Kane:

"I regard Spiritualism [she said] as one of the greatest curses that the world has ever known. . . . The worst of them all (the Spiritualists) is my eldest sister Leah, the wife of Daniel Underhill. I think she was the one who caused my arrest last spring and the bringing of the preposterous charge that I was cruel to my children and neglectful of them. I don't know why it is, she has always been jealous of Maggie and me; I suppose because we could do things in Spiritualism that she couldn't."

On October 21, a great meeting took place at New York in the large hall known as the Academy of Music. A certain Dr. Richmond, skillful in sleight of hand, imitated successfully the slate-writing and thought-reading phenomena of the séance room. Then Mrs. Margaretta Fox Kane stood up and, in her sister's presence, read a short speech, the most striking utterances of which run as follows:

"That I have been chiefly instrumental in perpetrating the fraud



of Spiritualism upon a too-confiding public, most of you doubtless know.

"The greatest sorrow in my life has been that this is true, and though it has come late in my day, I am now prepared to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, so help me God! . . .

"I am here tonight as one of the founders of Spiritualism to denounce it as an absolute falsehood from beginning to end, as the flimsiest of superstitions, the most wicked blasphemy known to the world."<sup>10</sup>

I have verified these facts by looking up the account given of the meeting in the *New York Herald* and the *New York Daily Tribune* for the next day, October 22. The *New York Herald* begins its article as follows:

"By throwing life and enthusiasm into her big toe Mrs. Margaret Fox Kane produced loud spirit-rapping in the Academy of Music last night and dealt a death-blow to Spiritualism, that huge and world-wide fraud which she and her sister Katie founded in 1848. Both sisters were present and both denounced Spiritualism as a monstrous imposition and a cheat.

"The great building was crowded and the wildest excitement prevailed at times. Hundreds of spiritualists had come to see the originators of their faith destroy it at one stroke. They were greatly agitated at times and hissed fiercely. Take it all in all, it was a most remarkable and dramatic spectacle."

A practical demonstration of the rappings followed Mrs. Kane's speech. The same reporter thus describes the scene:

"There was a dead silence. Everybody in the great audience knew that they were looking upon the woman who is principally responsible for Spiritualism, its foundress, high-priestess, and demonstrator. She stood upon a little pine table with nothing on her feet but stockings. As she remained motionless, loud distinct rappings were heard, now in the flies, now behind the scenes, now in the gallery."

The reporter of the *New York Daily Tribune* does not appear to have been quite so favourably impressed by Mrs. Kane's share in the performance. He describes her as "highly excited" and says that she "delivered her written address in

<sup>10</sup>R. B. Davenport, *The Deathblow to Spiritualism* (New York: 1888), p. 76.

a fragmentary and mirth-provoking style." Of the rapping demonstration he tells us: "she had slipped off a shoe to facilitate this scientific investigation and, putting her stockinged foot on the board, the audience heard a series of raps, 'rat-tat-tat-tat-tat,' increasing in sound from faint to loud and apparently traveling up the wall and along the roof of the Academy."

The *Herald* report is less critical, and it continues:

"Upon these rappings Spiritualism sprang into life, and here was the same toe rapping it out of existence. Mrs. Kane became excited. She clapped her hands, danced about and cried:

"'It's all a fraud! Spiritualism is a fraud from beginning to end! It's all a trick. There's no truth in it!'

"A whirlwind of applause followed."

Rather more than a year later, at the house of Henry J. Newton, a prominent spiritualist in New York, Mrs. Margaretta Fox Kane, in the presence of a reporter and witnesses, made a formal recantation of her previous confession:

"Would to God," she said, in a voice which trembled with intense excitement, "that I could undo the injustice I did the cause of Spiritualism when, under the strong psychological influence of persons inimical to it, I gave expression to utterances that had no foundation in fact."

At a further stage in the interview we have the following dialogue:

"Was there any truth in the charges you made against Spiritualism?"

"Those charges were false in every particular. I have no hesitation in saying that."

"Won't you name any of those who were instrumental in causing you to make such sweeping charges against the methods of 'your people'?"

"I do not wish to just now. But I will mention that persons high in the Catholic Church did their best to have me enter a convent."<sup>11</sup>

<sup>11</sup>Probably some such institution for inebriates as St. Veronica's Retreat, then existing at Chiswick.



"Was the offer made to you by anyone in this country?"

"No; in London. I had a letter from Cardinal Manning advising me to abandon this 'wicked work of the devil.'"<sup>12</sup>

It is worthy of notice that Mrs. Jencken, in a letter to *Light*, had already in some sort repudiated her share in the "exposure" at the Academy of Music. She died of drink in June, 1892, and Mrs. Kane, the last survivor of the Fox sisters, followed her, in March, 1893. Her end was pitiable and tragic. Witness the following:

"The tenement house of No. 456 West 57th Street, New York, is deserted now, except one room, from cellar to roof. The room is occupied by a woman nearly 60 years of age, an object of charity, a mental and physical wreck, whose appetite is only for intoxicating liquors. The face, though marked by age and dissipation, shows unmistakably that the woman was once beautiful.

"This wreck of womankind has been a guest in palaces and courts. The powers of mind, now almost imbecile, were the wonder and study of scientific men in America, Europe, and Australia. Her name was eulogized, sung, and ridiculed in a dozen languages. The lips that utter little else now than profanity once promulgated the doctrine of a new religion which still numbers its tens of thousands of enthusiastic believers."<sup>13</sup>

Postponing, for the moment, further comment on this infinitely sad history, the question naturally suggests itself: Which are we to believe of the two apparently contradictory statements recorded above? Is trust to be placed in the confession of fraud, or in the retraction of that confession a twelvemonth afterwards? Though it may seem a paradox-

<sup>12</sup>This account, with facsimile of signatures of Mrs. Kane and witnesses, appears in *The Medium and Daybreak*, December 27, 1889, copied from *The Celestial City*, a New York spiritualist journal. Cf. *Light*, December 20, 1889, p. 614.

<sup>13</sup>*Washington Daily Star*, March 7, 1893, quoted in *The Medium and Daybreak*, April 7, 1893, p. 212.

ical conclusion, my own inclination is to answer: "In both."

There is, no doubt, reason to believe that Mrs. Kane told the truth when she averred that the whole of Spiritualism, as she knew it, was contaminated by imposture. But she also told the truth when she admitted that she had lied in ascribing to trickery all the phenomena that occurred. Spiritualism was not all fraud. Genuine manifestations often took place under favourable conditions, but they could not always be evoked at will, and when the spirits were recalcitrant, recourse was had to fraud to supply what was needed.

That there may have been some element of trickery in the séances of the Fox sisters seems to be altogether probable. The fact that Mrs. Kane, when over 50 years of age, should still possess the power of producing a storm of raps, apparently by cracking her toe joints, would point to long practise, and however much we may discount the confession of a confirmed inebriate, influenced by vindictive motives, the report of the Buffalo doctors, the story told by Mrs. Culver, and the findings of the later Seybert Commission, point in the same direction. But there is more than this. The one redeeming feature in the career of Margaretta Fox a pathetic incident in itself, is the story of her relations with Dr. Elisha Kane, the Arctic explorer. By the testimony of all who knew him, Kane was a fine character, clean-living, enthusiastic, courageous to a fault, honourable, and tender-hearted. He first saw Margaretta when he was one day led by curiosity to attend one of the séances given by the Fox sisters, and her beauty and childlike simplicity seem to have made a strong appeal to him. He sought her acquaintance, and for a while succeeded in withdrawing her from her contaminating surroundings and paid for her education in Philadelphia. His own family, who belonged to a rather exclusive New York set, were much opposed to this attachment, but



eventually a secret marriage took place. Very shortly afterwards, in 1857, Kane fell ill, was sent to Havana for a cure, and died there without seeing his wife again. In due course a rather elaborate biography of Dr. Kane was published, which, while celebrating his achievements as a man and an explorer, completely ignored the whole of his relations with Margaretta Fox. In self-defence she, deeply hurt, sanctioned the issue of a volume entitled *The Love-Life of Dr. Kane*, which was compiled almost entirely from the letters he had addressed to her. At this time she had become a Catholic, and had given up Spiritualism. Hence, no attempt was made to disguise the earnestness with which he had constantly pleaded with her to have nothing more to do with the séances. Passages such as the following occur repeatedly:

"Oh, Maggie, are you never tired of this weary, weary sameness of continual deceit? Are you doomed thus to spend your days, doomed never to rise to better things?"

Or again:

"Don't rap for Mrs. Pierce (Mrs. Pierce was the wife of the then President of the United States). Remember your promise to me. . . . Begin again, dearest Maggie, and keep your word. No rapping for Mrs. Pierce, or ever more for anyone. I, dear Meg, am your best, your truest, your only friend."

Or once more:

"Do avoid spirits. I cannot bear to think of you as engaged in a course of wickedness and deception. Maggie you have no friend but me whose interest in you is disconnected from this cursed rapping. Pardon my saying so; but is it not deceit even to listen when others are deceived?"<sup>14</sup>

The references to the subject, always in the same tone, contained in Dr. Kane's letters, are far too numerous to quote. He even touched upon it in the verses he occasionally wrote to his beloved over the half-playful signature of "Preacher." Here is one brief extract:

<sup>14</sup>*The Love-Life of Dr. Kane* (New York: 1866), pp. 105, 114, 201.

Then the maiden sat and wept,  
Her hand upon her brow;  
So long this secret have I kept,  
I can't foreswear it now.  
It festers in my bosom,  
It cankers in my heart,  
Thrice cursed is the slave fast chained  
To a deceitful art.<sup>15</sup>

Taking the whole body of letters and documents printed in *The Love-Life of Dr. Kane*, it seems to me impossible that he would have written as frankly as he did except on the supposition that his fiancée had confessed to him the deceptions involved in the life she was leading. At what date the habits of intemperance, which in the end so fatally overshadowed the closing years of both sisters, first began to manifest themselves I am unable to say. It is only fair to point out that their father was apparently a victim to the same deplorable weakness, but the surroundings of the séance room must surely have had the worst effect on character, and it was no doubt because Dr. Kane saw Margaretta's need of some clear rule of life and strong religious influence that he, though a Protestant himself, encouraged her to join the Catholic Church. The fact is chronicled by the work just quoted, in a passage which betrays, quaintly enough, the writer's unfamiliarity with the ceremony of baptism:

"In August, 1858, she became a member of the Roman Catholic Church. Dr. Kane had often advised her to join this Church, and many times had accompanied her to Vespers at St. Anne's in Eighth Street, New York. The ceremony of her baptism at St. Peter's Church in Barclay Street, New York, was new in this country, and was attended by a large assemblage. The lady was attired in white and was accompanied by her sponsors, her father and mother, and her youngest sister. The priest made the sign of the cross upon the candidate's

<sup>15</sup>*Love-Life of Dr. Kane*, p. 40.



forehead, ears, eyes, nose and mouth, breast and shoulders, repeating appropriate words in Latin. She was anointed with the holy oils and introduced into the Church by receiving the stole, a long white veil reaching to the ground, and a burning light, emblematic of the faith. The occasion was the Feast of the Assumption, and the church and altar were decorated, the statue of the Virgin being covered with flowers."<sup>16</sup>

In one of the New York papers which mentioned this ceremony the following description is given of the new convert:

"She is a very interesting and lovely young lady and is very young. She has large dark Madonna eyes, a sweet expressive mouth, a petite and delicately moulded form, and a regal carriage of the head with an aristocratic air quite uncommon."

Mrs. Kane's break with Spiritualism seems, with occasional lapses, to have lasted for nearly ten years, but then, alas! she completely succumbed either to the solicitations addressed to her, or to the pinch of what was at least relative poverty. In the London *Spiritual Magazine* for July, 1867, we find it recorded that Margaretta Fox, who "embraced the Roman Catholic faith, and from religious motives, as it was thought, renounced Spiritualism," had again been associated with these manifestations. As the same journal states, "after her medium powers have been held in abeyance for so many years, she has at last been pressed by the spirits into their service at the very town of Rochester where she was first developed, and is now once again before the world as Mrs. Margaretta Fox Kane, with undiminished powers, as a spirit-medium." From this date, although in the service of Mr. Henry Seybert, the spiritualist, she was provided with an ample salary, she seems to have sunk steadily downward until the climax was reached which has already been described. Some of her fellow spiritualists drew harsh lessons from her

<sup>16</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 284.

sad history. For example, Mr. James Burns, the editor of *The Medium*, wrote as follows after her death was announced:

"Mrs. Kane, it has been made to appear, had intercourse with the Romanists, who prevailed on her to state that her mediumship was false and that Spiritualism had been her ruin. . . .

"Here we have a wonderful twofold spiritual spectacle; we have a woman giving spiritual manifestations to others, while within herself she is spiritually lost and misdirected. All moral sense, and control of mind and desire were gone. . . .

"But when the medium makes a trade of it and puffs the thing up as a commodity for sale, then farewell to all that might elevate or instruct in the subject. . . . Under such circumstances, and with drunkenness, sensuality and moral abasement of all kinds added, is it any wonder that this kind of thing has covered the cause with scandals and left a heap of festering corpses along the course of these 45 years?"<sup>17</sup>

Mr. James Burns, as editor and publisher, was a pillar of English Spiritualism, and the strength of this language would suggest that the past record of the movement, better known to him than to most others, did not seem a matter for unmixed satisfaction.

I have said that, while fully admitting the part played by trickery in the exhibitions of the Fox sisters, I also believe in the authenticity of a good deal of the rapping phenomena. In arriving at this conclusion no argument impresses me more than the marvellously rapid spread of the movement. Of the many hundreds, not to say thousands, of mediums who within three or four years were developed in the United States, it is inconceivable that all were rapping with their toes or adopting some similar fraudulent device. If that were all the mystery, there would at least have been a fair proportion of them, who having found out that they could perform the silly trick, would have grown bored, and would, as I

<sup>17</sup>James Burns, in *The Medium and Daybreak*, London, April 28, 1893, p. 258.



have remarked before, have found it easier to earn money by exposing the procedure than by seeking out dupes who believed in it. A craze like this requires some foundation in fact, some real mystery, to set people speculating and to keep them interested. Anyone who can believe that the whole movement, involving, to say the very least, tens of thousands of people, some of them men of high intellectual eminence, was based on nothing better than a mere children's prank, seems to me to show a lack of practical judgment and common sense. Supposing, as Faraday claimed to have proved, that table-turning may be accounted for by unconscious muscular action, it is easy to understand that many who practised such experiments must have believed in good faith that the tables were turned by the spirits. The mediums, or those who thought they were mediums, may themselves have been deluded. But with rappings which were due to trickery, such self-deception was impossible. People who rapped with their toes or their knee joints must have known that they did it. No circle which assembled could have obtained any raps at all except in the presence of some fraudulent persons who had acquired by long practice the rather difficult art of producing them. Under these conditions I cannot account for the fascination of the craze, its rapid extension and relative permanence.

Moreover, apart from more general considerations, one has the evidence of the facts. Persons known to me, sitting as novices to experiment out of mere curiosity, without a medium, have obtained raps at their very first trial. In Dr. W. Crawford's séances with Miss Kathleen Goligher, an unpaid medium, which were said to be conducted under strict test conditions, knocks of every description were heard, and served as means of communication. Sir William Barrett, F.R.S., who assisted at some of these sittings, describes how,

when a loud knock was given and a request was made for something still louder, "there came a tremendous bang which shook the room and resembled the blow of a sledge hammer on an anvil."<sup>18</sup> This could hardly have been due to the cracking of Miss Goligher's joints, then a girl of seventeen. The late Lord Rayleigh, F.R.S., in his presidential address, at which I was myself present in 1919, told the Society for Psychical Research how Mrs. Jencken (Katie Fox), when staying in his own house in 1874, though remaining motionless and in a good light, produced from the door "loud thumps such as one would hardly like to make with one's knee."<sup>19</sup> The amount of first-rate scientific evidence for phenomena of this kind seems to me quite overwhelming, and if these things can happen now, there is no intrinsic reason why the Fox girls should not, at least occasionally, have been similarly favoured in the early days at Hydesville and Rochester.

But however the case may be regarding the reality of the rappings from which modern Spiritualism sprang into being, the moral degradation of Margaretta and Katie Fox stands revealed for all time. If the confession of 1888 is worthy of credit, the whole edifice of Spiritualism has been reared upon systematic imposture. If, on the other hand, we are rather to trust their subsequent retraction, they have thereby convicted themselves of the basest ingratitude to their spiritualist benefactors and of a blasphemously solemn appeal to God to witness to a lie.

<sup>18</sup>*Proceedings of the Society for Psychical Research*, Vol. XX, p. 335, 1919. Mr. Whately Smith, who was present on other occasions, similarly speaks of "sledge-hammer blows which shook the whole floor." *Ibid.*, p. 314. Here and elsewhere I quote Sir William Barrett because I knew him well, and, like all others who were acquainted with him, am convinced of his absolute sincerity, as well as of his alertness and accuracy as an observer.

<sup>19</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 280.



At the same time I should be sorry to speak unsympathetically of the sad career of these two so-called Founders of Spiritualism. Few priests can fail to have met cases in which a most generous and attractive character has been pitifully transformed by the subtle virus of alcoholism, and it is often very hard to decide how far the poor victims are responsible for what they do. It was not only Dr. Elisha Kane who paid tribute to the charm of the Fox sisters. Mr. Horace Greeley, the well-known editor of the *New York Tribune* and a statesman of rare breadth of view, remained their cordial friend for several years and tried his best to rescue them from their surroundings. What is more surprising, Orestes A. Brownson, in his curious *causerie*, half novel, half dissertation, entitled *The Spirit Rapper* (1854), speaks of the two girls in the most appreciative terms.

"I owe it [he declares] to them and to the public to say, that they were simple-minded honest girls, utterly incapable of inventing anything like those knockings, or of playing any trick upon the public. The knockings were and are as much a mystery for them as for others, and they honestly believe that through them actual communication is held with the spirits of the departed. They are in good faith, as they some time since evinced by their wish to become members of the Catholic Church, which certainly they would not have wished, in this country at least, if they looked upon themselves as impostors, and had only worldly and selfish ends in view. They are no doubt deceived, not as to the facts, as to the phenomena of spirit rappings, but as to the explanation they give or attempt to give of them. They have not always been treated, I fear, with due tenderness, and sufficient pains have not been taken to enlighten them as to the real nature of these phenomena."<sup>20</sup>

This statement, first printed in the autumn of 1854, that both sisters had leanings towards Catholicism is in many ways remarkable. It certainly must have been founded on

<sup>20</sup>*The Works of Orestes A. Brownson*, collected and arranged by H. F. Brownson. Vol. IX, p. 81.

some definite piece of information, for at that date the two Fox girls were quite public characters in American life, and a highly respected and representative Catholic, such as Brownson was, could not afford to print a mere surmise without imminent risk of finding himself ignominiously confuted by one of their many admirers. As stated above, Margaretta Fox Kane did not actually join the Catholic Church until August, 1858, four years after the appearance of the work just quoted; while Katie Fox, so far as I am aware, never became Catholic at all. Margaretta seems to have persevered in some sort of profession of Catholicism for about ten years, but even at that time she cannot have been entirely faithful in her renunciation of spiritualistic practices, for R. Dale Owen, in his book *The Debatable Land*, mentions that on October 25, 1860, she took part with her sister Kate in a séance at which he was present — a sitting which was marked by a blow of quite terrific violence striking, as it seemed, the centre of the table. "By the sound," he declares, "it was such a stroke, apparently delivered by a strong man with a heavy bludgeon, as would have killed anyone." Phenomena of this kind seem to have been characteristic of the mediumship of Margaretta Fox. In a footnote, Mr. Owen observes that this was "the only time, I believe, at which she joined our circle. Having become a Catholic, she had scruples about sitting."<sup>21</sup>

There was undoubtedly something exceptional in the knocks produced under the mediumship of Mrs. Fox Kane, and her sister seems to have possessed the same power of originating violent percussive noises apparently at will. Was this due to the action of subservient spirits, who obeyed their behests, or was it, as has been suggested, a faculty inherent in themselves of projecting etheric or teleplasmic rods, in-

<sup>21</sup>R. Dale Owen, *The Debatable Land* (London, 1871), pp. 275-276.



visible to normal sight but in some degree under the medium's control? Apparently the knockings were, as Brownson says, "as much a mystery for them as they were for others." They did not know how they produced them, and this may possibly account for the submissiveness with which Margaretta bore with her fiancé's reproaches of deception. She let people think that the spirits were knocking, whereas she was at least vaguely conscious that the force came from something inside herself. I agree with Sir A. C. Doyle that the matter is shrouded in mystery. At the same time it is very difficult to resist the evidence that raps, thuds, or crashes did occur, and occurred not merely in the darkness, but in full light, at times when every movement of the medium could be observed. Sir William Crookes, F.R.S., who was not then a spiritualist, but who believed in what he and Sergeant Cox called "psychic force," wrote very emphatically upon the subject. After stating that sounds or raps are noticed with almost every medium, each having a special peculiarity, he goes on:

"But for power and certainty I have met with no one who at all approached Miss Kate Fox. For several months I enjoyed almost unlimited opportunity of testing the various phenomena occurring in the presence of this lady, and I especially examined the phenomena of these sounds. With mediums generally, it is necessary to sit for a formal séance before anything is heard; but in the case of Miss Fox it seems only necessary for her to place her hand on any substance for loud thuds to be heard in it, like a triple pulsation, sometimes loud enough to be heard several rooms off. In this manner I have heard them in a living tree—on a sheet of glass—on a stretched iron wire—on a stretched membrane—a tambourine—on the roof of a cab—and on the floor of a theater. Moreover actual contact is not necessary. I have heard these sounds proceeding from the floor, walls, etc., when the medium's hands and feet were held—when she was standing on a chair—when she was suspended in a swing from the ceiling—when she was inclosed in a wire cage—and when she had fallen fainting on a sofa. . . . With a full knowledge of the numerous theories which have been started, chiefly in America, to

explain these sounds, I have tested them in every way I could devise, until there has been no escape from the conviction that they were true objective occurrences, not produced by trickery or mechanical means.<sup>22</sup>

It must be remembered that Sir William Crookes, the discoverer of thallium, and the inventor of the radiometer, was a very eminent scientific man, who in 1874 was at the height of his powers. Unlike Sir A. C. Doyle in our own day, or Judge Edmonds in a past generation, he was then wedded to no quasi-religious theory. He himself states explicitly—

That certain physical phenomena, such as the movement of material substances, and the production of sounds resembling electric charges, occur under circumstances in which they cannot be explained by any physical law at present known, is a fact of which I am as certain as I am of the most elementary fact in chemistry. My whole scientific education has been one long lesson in exactness of observation, and I wish it to be distinctly understood that this firm conviction is the result of most careful investigation. But I cannot, at present, hazard even the most vague hypothesis as to the cause of the phenomena. Hitherto I have seen nothing to convince me of the truth of the "spiritual" theory.<sup>23</sup>

Those, however, who believe that the knockings of the Fox sisters were caused by spirits, e.g., by the ghost of the murdered peddler, have a very serious difficulty to face. In her own private apartment, as described by a *New York Herald* reporter, and again before a crowded audience at the Academy of Music, Mrs. Kane produced raps at will, in order to prove that the spirits had nothing to do with the matter and that she caused the sounds herself. The spiritualists, therefore, are forced to admit that the spirits in this

<sup>22</sup>Crookes, *Researches in the Phenomena of Spiritualism* (1874), p. 87. Obviously some, at least, of the phenomena must have been observed in daylight.

<sup>23</sup>Crookes, *op. cit.*, pp. 3-4. I may note that even Father de Heredia, S.J., does not dispute the fact that the production of raps, though at present unexplained, may be due to purely natural causes. See his book *Los Fraudes Espiritistas y los Fenomenos Metapsiquicos* (1931), pp. 255-265.



case bore testimony to their own non-existence, and also that Mrs. Kane, even when half intoxicated, had an assured conviction that they would not fail her. Thus we find ourselves confronted by a very curious problem. Perhaps another century or two of psychic research may provide a solution, but, for the present, Sir William Crookes' attitude of reserve seems still to impose itself.

In his article entitled "The Mystery of the Three Fox Sisters" (1922) and in his *History of Spiritualism* (1926), Sir A. C. Doyle did his best to palliate the stigma which the career of Margaretta and Kate had fastened upon the cause. But he could not dispute the fact that the scene at the Academy of Music took place as described above. He also admitted that Kate, as well as Mrs. Kane, in a printed interview, declared that what happened at Hydesville "was all humbuggery, every bit of it." Moreover, he avowed that when Mrs. Kane was bent on demonstrating that Spiritualism was nothing but trickery she produced a storm of raps at will, not only in the public hall where they were audible to a large assembly and seemed to come from the walls and roof of the building, but also privately when she was interviewed by a reporter of the *New York Herald*. Sir Arthur was probably right when he remarked:

"She really knew no more of the nature of these forces than those around her did. The editor [i.e., of *The Love-Life of Dr. Kane*] says: 'She always averred that she never fully believed the rappings to be the work of spirits, but imagined mere occult laws of nature were concerned.' This was her attitude later in life, for on her professional card she printed that people must judge the nature of the powers for themselves."<sup>24</sup>

And again:

"When a man like Dr. Kane assured Margaretta that it was very wrong, he was only saying what was dinned into his ears from every quarter, including half the pulpits of New York. Probably she had

<sup>24</sup>*History of Spiritualism*, I, p. 92.

an uneasy feeling that it *was* wrong, without in the least knowing why, and this may account for the fact that she does not seem to remonstrate with him for his suspicions."<sup>25</sup>

Doyle's theory, as already hinted, was that Maggie's raps were caused by the protrusion from some part of her person of a long rod of ectoplasm, a substance invisible to the eye under normal conditions, but which is capable of conducting energy in such a fashion as to make sounds and strike blows at a distance. He appealed to Dr. Crawford's experiments with the Goligher circle, in which good evidence was obtained of the existence of some such mysterious substance. Further, he considered that "it is entirely possible that Margaretta had some control over the expulsion of ectoplasm which caused the sound." In the Goligher séances, however, we were given to understand that it was the "operators," spirits who required to be treated with every courtesy, who were the executants of all the phenomena. The medium was an absolutely passive instrument. But Margaretta Fox Kane was evidently sure of her own powers. When she wanted to rap, the raps came, even though she used the gift to demonstrate that the phenomena were all fraudulent. Those, then, who adhere to the belief that it is the spirits who produce the raps are forced, as stated previously, to admit that the spirits in this case bore testimony to their own non-existence, and also that Margaretta had an assured conviction that they would not fail her. On the other hand, if we suppose that she was able at will to extrude ectoplasmic rods as far as the roof of the hall and thus produce the raps unaided, the whole spiritualistic element disappears. She may have had this power from childhood, and it may be some precisely similar power which is responsible for the *Poltergeist* phenomena, which are almost invariably asso-

<sup>25</sup>*Ibid.*, I, p. 90.



ciated with a child or young person under twenty. From the narrative of Leah (Mrs. Underhill) in her book, *The Missing Link*, Doyle was led to conclude that "the entities with which the Fox circle were at first in contact were not of the highest order."

This is, of course, but a very imperfect sketch of the career of the Fox sisters. One might have said much about the well-attested manifestations witnessed at their séances in early days, and one might have dwelt upon the ample provision made for them by patrons like Horace H. Day, Henry Seybert, and Charles F. Livermore.<sup>26</sup> If only they had been able to exercise self-control, they would never have been in any danger of poverty. But while we make the fullest possible allowance for the pitiable effects of heredity in the matter of intemperance, the impression left upon us is intensely sad and even sinister. It surely needs a curious obliquity of vision to see anything divine in a revelation ushered into the world under such auspices.

<sup>26</sup>See for example *The Spiritual Magazine*, 1871, pp. 525-526, and Emma Hardinge Britten's *Autobiography*, p. 39.

## CHAPTER III

## CATHOLICISM AND THE EARLY SPIRITUALISTS

IN A BOOK which is almost certainly the first considerable work on Spiritualism produced by a British author — I refer to Henry Spicer's *Sights and Sounds*,<sup>1</sup> may be found many interesting sidelights upon the beginnings of that perplexing movement which has since occasioned so much controversy. Visiting the United States in a spirit of complete scepticism, Mr. Spicer eventually became a believer in the philosophy, or at any rate in the phenomena, of the new cult, and, in spite of many trivialities and digressions, his pages preserve a more impartial picture of the conditions under which the craze developed than can easily be met with elsewhere. I do not here propose, however, to discuss the work in question, but a casual utterance which is recorded therein and which purports to emanate from the spirits in the beyond, seems worthy of the attention of those who approach the subject from the Catholic standpoint. Speaking of the non-sectarian character of Spiritualism in these very early days, Mr. Spicer declares that "persons of all Churches and creeds have lent themselves to the movement," and he goes on to state that "one of the most remarkable *media* in answer to a question 'Which religion is the true one?' answered — 'None are perfect, but the Roman Catholic Church is nearest to the truth.'"<sup>2</sup>

Who the particular medium was through whom this an-

<sup>1</sup>The full title is *Sights and Sounds; the Mystery of the Day, Comprising an entire History of the American "Spirit" Manifestations*, by Henry Spicer, Esq. (London: Thomas Bosworth, 1853), 486 pp.

<sup>2</sup>*Sights and Sounds*, p. 444. *Media*, still italicized in these early books as a new locution, was often used at first by spiritistic writers for the plural of medium.